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THE OCEAN IS MY MAN NOW. HE KNOWS WHEN TO REAR AND HUMP HIS BACK. WHEN TO BE QUIET AND SIMPLY WATCH A WOMAN. HE HAS NEVER BEEN A FALSE-HEARTED MAN. HIS HEART IS DEEP DOWN THERE, BUT I PAY ATTENTION AND KNOW IT AS WELL AS HE DOES. THAT KIND OF UNDERSTANDING CAN ONLY COME FROM PRACTICE AND I HAD A LOT OF THAT WITH MR. COSEY. I FATHOMED HIS MIND TOO. NOT RIGHT AWAY, OF COURSE, I WAS JUST A GIRL WHEN I WAS INTRODUCED TO HIM—A YOUNG, AMBITIOUS MAN WITH A SON AND A SICK WIFE WHO NEEDED CARE EVERY MINUTE OF THE DAY AND NIGHT. HE SAID HER NAME, JULIA, SO SOFT YOU COULD HEAR THE LOVE IN IT AS WELL AS THE SORROW. THEIR SON, BILLY BOY, WAS TWELVE WHEN MRS. COSEY PASSED AND EVEN THOUGH I WAS ONLY FOURTEEN, IT

WAS THE MOST NATURAL THING IN THE WORLD FOR ME TO STAY ON AND LOOK AFTER THE TWO OF THEM. ONLY A WIDE HEART COULD HOLD THAT MUCH LOVE FOR A WIFE AND HAVE SO MUCH ROOM LEFT OVER. IT TOOK ME A WHILE TO LEARN THAT. WHEN JULIA COSEY DIED MR. COSEY TRANSFERRED ALL OF WHAT HE FELT TO HIS SON. LUCKY FOR HIM, THE BOY HAD THAT INSIGHT CHILDREN HAVE TO USE WITH GROWN UPS TO STAY LOVED. NOT BY DOING WHAT THEY SAY, BUT FIGURING OUT WHAT THEY REALLY WANT. A DADDY CAN SAY "FEND FOR YOURSELF, BOY" WHILE HE MEANS "DON'T SHOW ME UP; HURRY UP AND FAIL." OR HE CAN SAY "I'LL TEACH YOU THE WORLD," MEANING "I'M SCARED TO DEATH OF YOU." I DON'T KNOW WHAT MR. COSEY SAID TO HIS SON ALONG THOSE LINES, BUT WHATEVER IT WAS, BILLY BOY UNDERSTOOD IT TO MEAN^{it} BE SOMETHING I CAN GET UP FOR IN THE MORNING; GIVE ME SOMETHING TO DO WHILE I PADDLE ALONG." SO IT DIDN'T MATTER MUCH IF HE WAS A VERY GOOD SON OR A REALLY BAD ONE. HE ONLY HAD TO BE INTERESTING. JUST BY LUCK, I SUSPECT, HE CHOSE THE FORMER. MR. COSEY WAS PLEASED WITH EVERYTHING BILLY BOY DID AND SAID. HE

TOOK HIM EVERYWHERE. WITH HIS HAIR PARTED IN THE MIDDLE AND A CAP JUST LIKE HIS FATHER'S—WHAT A PAIR THEY MUST HAVE BEEN SITTING IN THE BLEACHERS AT EAGLE GAMES, ON CAMP STOOLS AT SING-OUT COMPETITIONS, AT NARROW TABLES IN JOINTS WHERE THE BEST UNKNOWN MUSICIANS PLAYED. MR COSEY SAID HE WANTED BILLY BOY TO SEE MEN ENJOY THE PERFECTION OF THEIR WORK SO THEY WENT TO PERDIDO STREET FOR KING OLIVER, MEMPHIS FOR THE TIGERS, BIRMINGHAM FOR THE BARONS. THEY WATCHED HOW COOKS EXAMINED MARKET PRODUCE, WATERMEN SORT OYSTERS, BARTENDERS, POOL HALL RASCALS, GANDY DANCERS. EVERYTHING WAS A LABOR LESSON FROM SOMEONE WHO LOVED HIS SKILL THE WAY A MAN LOVES A WOMAN—WHICH IS TO SAY EVERY WHICH WAY (PROVIDED HE DIDN'T HAVE TO BE ONE).

ALL THAT ATTENTION DIDN'T SPOIL THE BOY. HE KNEW HIS DUTY AND SPLASHED IN IT, COULD SMILE EVEN AS HIS FATHER BRAGGED ABOUT HIM IN FRONT OF BORED FRIENDS. BRAGGED ABOUT HIS ARM WITH A BALL, HIS HEART IN EMERGENCY. HOW HE HAD EXTRACTED A BENT NAIL FISH HOOK STUCK IN A LITTLE GIRL'S FACE BETTER THAN

ANY DOCTOR COULD HAVE. I SAW THAT ONE MYSELF. I'D BROUGHT THE LUNCH THEY WANTED ONE DAY WHILE THEY WASTED TIME PRACTICING ON THE BEACH-KNOCKING ^EPUBBLES INTO THE SEA WITH BASEBALL BATS. DOWN A WAYS A GIRL, MAYBE NINE OR TEN YEARS OLD, WAS CASTING INTO THE WAVES. FOR WHAT, WHO KNOWS. NOTHING WITH SCALES SWIMS THIS CLOSE TO ^hTHE SHORE. ON THE SECOND THROW THE HOME MADE HOOK HOOKED HER. AND THERE SHE WAS, TRYING QUIETLY TO GET FREE OF IT. HER FINGERS WERE DRIPPING RED WHEN BILLY BOY GOT TO HER. HE WAS DEFT ENOUGH AND SHE WAS GRATEFUL STANDING THERE CUPPING HER FACE WITH OUT A TEAR OR A MOAN. BUT WE TOOK HER BACK TO THE HOTEL ANYWAY. I SAT HER IN THE GAZEBO, CLEANED HER CHEEK AND SPREAD ALOE GUM ON THE WOUND, HOPING SHE WAS TOO STRONG FOR LOCKJAW. OVER TIME, AS USUAL, MR. COSEY PLUMPED UP THE STORY. DEPENDING ON HIS MOOD AND HIS AUDIENCE YOU WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THE CHILD WAS ABOUT TO BE DRAGGED INTO THE WATER BY A SWORDFISH IF BILLY BOY HADN'T SAVED HER. OR THAT BILLY HAD REMOVED A HOOK FROM A BABY'S EYEBALL. BILLY BOY

SMILED AT THESE FAT, LOVABLE LIES, AND TOOK HIS FATHER'S ADVICE IN EVERYTHING INCLUDING MARRIAGE: TO MARRY A DEVOTED NOT CALCULATING GIRL. SO BILLY BOY CHOSE MAY WHO WOULD NEITHER INTERFERE WITH NOR RIVAL THE CLOSE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FATHER AND SON. MR. COSEY WAS ALARMED AT FIRST NOT BEING PRIVY TO HIS SON'S SELECTION, BUT WAS MADE EASY WHEN THE BRIDE NOT ONLY FELL IN LOVE WITH THE HOTEL, BUT SHOWED SIGNS OF UNDERSTANDING WHAT SUPERIOR MEN REQUIRE. IF I WAS A SERVANT IN THAT PLACE; MAY WAS ITS SLAVE. HER WHOLE LIFE WAS MAKING SURE THOSE COSEY MEN HAD WHAT THEY WANTED. THE FATHER MORE THAN THE SON; THE FATHER MORE THAN HER OWN DAUGHTER. AND WHAT MR. COSEY, WIDOWER, WANTED IN 1930 SHOULD HAVE BEEN IMPOSSIBLE. THAT WAS THE YEAR THE WHOLE COUNTRY BEGAN TO LIVE THE WAY UP BEACH PEOPLE DID-IF THEY WERE LUCKY, THAT IS. IF NOT, THEY KILLED THEMSELVES OR TOOK TO THE ROAD. MR. COSEY, HOWEVER, TOOK ADVANTAGE. HE BOUGHT A BROKE DOWN 'WHITES ONLY' CLUB AT SOOKER BAY FROM A MAN HONEST ENOUGH TO SAY THAT ALTHOUGH HE SWORE TO GOD AND HIS PAPPY HE

WOULD NEVER SELL TO NIGRAS, HE WAS HAPPY AS A CLAM TO BREAK HIS OATH AND TAKE HIS FAMILY AWAY FROM THAT GNAT-INFESTED SIDEWALK FOR HURRICANES.

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THAT IN THE TEETH OF THE DEPRESSION COLORED PEOPLE WOULD WANT TO PLAY, OR IF THEY DID HOW COULD THEY PAY FOR IT? MR. COSEY, THAT'S WHO. BECAUSE HE KNEW WHAT A HARMONICA PLAYER ON A STREET CORNER KNEW: WHERE THERE WAS MUSIC THERE WAS MONEY. CHECK THE CHURCHES IF YOU DOUBT IT. AND HE BELIEVED SOMETHING ELSE. IF COLORED MUSICIANS WERE TREATED WELL, PAID WELL AND CODDLED, THEY WOULD TELL ONE ANOTHER ABOUT SUCH A PLACE WHERE THEY COULD WALK IN THE FRONT DOOR NOT THE SERVICE ENTRANCE; EAT IN THE DINING ROOM NOT THE KITCHEN; SIT WITH THE GUESTS, SLEEP IN BEDS NOT THEIR AUTOMOBILES OR IN A WHORE HOUSE ACROSS TOWN. A PLACE WHERE THEIR INSTRUMENTS WERE SAFE, THEIR DRINKS UN-WATERED, THEIR TALENT HONORED SO THEY DIDN'T HAVE TO GO TO COPENHAGEN OR PARIS FOR LOVE. FLOCKS OF COLORED PEOPLE WOULD PAY TO BE IN THAT ATMOSPHERE. THOSE WHO HAD THE

MONEY WOULD PAY IT; THOSE WHO DIDN'T WOULD FIND IT. IT COMFORTS EVERYBODY TO THINK OF ALL NEGROES AS DIRT POOR, AND OF THOSE WHO WERE NOT, WHO EARNED GOOD MONEY AND KEPT IT, AS SOME KIND OF SHAMEFUL, MIRACLE. WHITE PEOPLE LIKED IT BECAUSE NEGROES WITH MONEY AND SENSE MAKE THEM NERVOUS. COLORED PEOPLE LIKED IT BECAUSE, IN THOSE DAYS, THEY TRUSTED POVERTY, BELIEVED IT WAS A SIGN OF HONESTY. TOO MUCH MONEY HAD A WHIFF OF EVIL AND SOMEBODY ELSE'S BLOOD. MR. COSEY DIDN'T CARE. IF RESENTMENT WAS THE ONLY TAX HE HAD TO PAY, IT WAS CHEAP. HE WANTED A PLAYGROUND FOR FOLK WHO THOUGHT THE WAY HE DID, WHO BUSIED THEMSELVES MAKING MONEY INSTEAD OF GROANING, WHO HAD A PLAN INSTEAD OF A PALM.

BUT IT HAD TO BE SPECIAL: EVENING DRESS IN THE EVENING; SPORT CLOTHES FOR SPORT. AND NO ZOOT SUITS. FLOWERS IN THE BEDROOMS, CRYSTAL ON THE TABLE. MUSIC, DANCING AND, IF YOU WANTED TO, YOU COULD JOIN A PRIVATE CARD GAME WHERE MONEY CHANGED HANDS. NOTHING BIG; NOTHING CRUDE. JUST A FEW

FRIENDS, MUSICIANS, DOCTORS WHO ENJOYED THE EXCITEMENT OF LOSING WHAT MOST PEOPLE COULDN'T EARN.

TK

MAY, A PREACHER'S DAUGHTER BRED TO HARD WORK AND DUTY, TOOK TO THE BUSINESS LIKE A BEE TO POLLEN. AT FIRST THE TWO OF US MANAGED THE KITCHEN, WITH BILLY BOY WAITING TABLES. WHEN IT BECAME CLEAR THAT THE QUEEN AT THE STOVE WAS ME, SHE MOVED TO HOUSEKEEPING, BOOKKEEPING, PROCURING AND HER HUSBAND BOOKED THE MUSICIANS. I THINK I DESERVE HALF THE CREDIT FOR THE WAY THE BUSINESS GREW. GOOD FOOD AND FATS WALLER IS A ONCE IN A LIFETIME COMBINATION. STILL, YOU HAD TO ADMIRE MAY. SHE WAS THE ONE WHO ARRANGED EVERYTHING, SAW TO THE LINEN, PAID THE BILLS, CONTROLLED THE HELP. THE TWO OF US WERE LIKE THE BACK OF A CLOCK. MR. COSEY WAS ITS FACE TELLING YOU THE TIME WAS NOW.

WHEN WE WERE JUST TWO FEMALES—MAY AND ME—THINGS WENT ALONG FINE. IT WAS WHEN THE GIRLS GOT IN THE PICTURE—CHRISTINE AND HEED— THINGS BEGAN TO FRAY. OH, I KNOW

Mr. Cozey
and
May gave

THE "REASONS": CIVIL RIGHTS, INTEGRATION, CANNERY SMELL. BUT
THE FRAY STARTED WAY BEFORE THAT. NINETEEN FORTY TWO, I PLACE
IT. THE HOTEL WAS CLIMBING FAST. THAT WINDOW OVER THERE
LOOKED OUT ON PARADISE. ^{A paradise} ONE THE TWO OF US MADE BECAUSE
MR. COSEY WAS RUNNING ON FUMES. WHEN BILLY BOY DIED IN 1935
MR. COSY SEEMS TO DISAPPEAR FOR A YEAR OR TWO. BUT HE REVVED
BACK UP SUDDENLY AND TURNED THE PLACE INTO THE PLACE TO BE.
WOMEN TRAILED HIM AND I KEPT MY EYES OPEN FOR WHO HE MIGHT
CHOOSE. EXCEPT FOR ONE, HE TOOK CASUAL WOMEN CASUALLY SO
I WAS KNOCKED OUT OF MY SOCKS WHEN HE DID CHOOSE. WORD
WAS HE WANTED CHILDREN, LOTS OF CHILDREN, TO FILL UP THE
MIRROR THE WAY BILLY BOY USED TO. FOR THAT ONLY AN UNUSED
GIRL WOULD DO. FOR MOTHERHOOD. ANYWAY AFTER PLAYING
AROUND A BIT, MR. COSEY ENDED UP IN THE MOST LIKELY PLACE FOR
MAKING BABIES AND THE LEAST LIKELY FOR A VIRGIN. UP BEACH.
WHERE EVERY WOMAN'S OBITUARY COULD HAVE READ "DEATH BY
CHILDREN." MARRYING HEED IN 1942 WAS THE FIRST STEP TO
RUINATION. SEE, HE CHOSE A GIRL ALREADY SPOKEN FOR. NOT BY A

BOY FRIEND. AND NOT PROMISED TO ANYONE BY HER PARENTS.

THAT TRASH GAVE HER UP LIKE THEY WOULD A PUPPY. NO. SHE

BELONGED TO CHRISTINE AND CHRISTINE BELONGED TO HER. ^{they} THAT

^{had} WAS A THING, ^{Well,} THOSE TWO. HEED NEVER GAVE HIM A TADPOLE AND ,

LIKE MOST MEN, HE BELIEVED THE FAULT WAS HERS. HE WAITED A

WHILE, I HAVE TO SAY, TO GO BACK TO HIS FAVORITE, BUT BACK HE

WENT. YOU'D THINK SINCE ONE OF HIS WOMEN HAD A STROKE AFTER

ROOTING WITH HIM IN THE SAND, HE'D AVOID THE BEACH AS A

SETTING FOR FUN. BUT HE DIDN'T. HE LIKED IT THERE. GOOD

WEATHER OR FOUL. ME TOO.

I LIKED WALKING THE SHORE ROUTE HOME WHATEVER THE
WEATHER. THE SKY IS EMPTY NOW, ERASED, BUT THEN THE MILKY WAY
WAS COMMON AS DIRT. ITS LIGHT MADE EVERYTHING A LOVELY BLACK
AND WHITE MOVIE. NO MATTER WHAT YOUR PLACE IN LIFE OR YOUR
STATE OF MIND, HAVING A STAR PACKED SKY BE PART OF YOUR NIGHT
MADE YOU FEEL RICH. AND THEN THERE WAS THE SEA. FISHERMEN
TELL ME THERE IS LIFE DOWN THERE THAT LOOKS LIKE WEDDING VEILS
AND ROPES OF GOLD WITH RUBY EYES. THEY SAY SOME MAKE YOU

THINK OF THE COLLARS OF SCHOOL TEACHERS OR PARASOLS MADE
OF FLOWERS. THAT'S WHAT I WAS THINKING ABOUT ONE EVENING
AFTER A BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION^{at the hotel}. OFF AND ON, WHENEVER I FELT LIKE
IT, I STAYED IN MY MOTHER'S HOUSE IN UP BEACH. I WAS ON MY WAY
THERE THAT NIGHT WHEN I SAW MR. COSEY WITH HIS SHOES IN HIS
HAND WALKING NORTH BACK TOWARD THE HOTEL. I WAS UP AT THE
GRASS LINE HOPING TO CATCH A BREEZE STRONG ENOUGH TO GET
THE SMOKE SMELL OUT OF MY UNIFORM. HE WAS FURTHER DOWN,
SLOSHING THROUGH THE WAVES. I RAISED MY HAND TO SAY
"EVENING," BUT SOMETHING—THE WAY HE HELD HIS HEAD, MAYBE, OR
A KIND OF PRIVACY WRAPPED ABOUT HIM—STOPPED ME. I WANTED TO
WARN HIM BUT ^(over) I JUST KEPT ON WALKING. DOWN A WAYS I SAW
SOMEBODY ELSE. A WOMAN SITTING ON A BLANKET MASSAGING HER
HEAD WITH BOTH HANDS. I STOOD THERE WHILE SHE GOT UP, NAKED
AS TRUTH, AND WENT INTO THE WAVES. THE TIDE WAS OUT SO SHE
HAD TO WALK A LONG TIME FOR THE WATER TO REACH HER WAIST.
TALL, RAGGEDY CLOUDS DRIFTED ACROSS THE MOON AND I
REMEMBER HOW MY HEART KICKED. POLICE-HEADS WERE ON THE

I didn't.
The moon and the
milky way so bright
every thing felt
I can't keep walking
safe

MOVE THEN: THEY HAD ALREADY DROWNED THE JOHNSON KIDS;
ALMOST KILLED THE CANNERY GIRL. BUT THIS WOMAN KEPT ON
WADING OUT AND I COULD TELL SHE WASN'T AFRAID OF THEM—OR OF
ANYTHING BECAUSE SHE STRETCHED, RAISED HER ARMS, AND DOVE. I
REMEMBER THAT ARC BETTER THAN I REMEMBER YESTERDAY. SHE WAS
OUT OF SIGHT FOR A TIME AND I HELD MY BREATH AS LONG AS SHE
DID. FINALLY SHE SURFACED. I BREATHED AGAIN WHILE SHE SWAM
BACK TO SHALLOW WATER. SHE STOOD UP AND MASSAGED HER HEAD
once more
AGAIN. HER HAIR, FLAT WHEN SHE WENT IN, ROSE UP SLOWLY AND
TOOK ON THE SHAPE OF THE CLOUDS DRAGGING THE MOON. THEN
SHE—WELL, MADE A SOUND. I DON'T KNOW TO THIS DAY WHETHER IT
WAS A NOTE, A SCREAM OR A CALL. ALL I KNOW IS THAT IS WAS A
SOUND I WANTED TO ANSWER. EVEN THOUGH NORMALLY I'M REAL
QUIET.

I WATCH MY MAN FROM THE PORCH. IN THE EVENING
MOSTLY, BUT SUNRISE TOO. THERE USED TO BE WHITE WICKER CHAIRS
OUT HERE WHERE PRETTY WOMEN DRANK ICED TEA WITH A DROP OF
JACK DANIELS OR CUTTY SARK IN IT. NOTHING LEFT NOW, SO I SIT ON

THE STEPS OR LEAN MY ELBOWS ON THE RAILINGS. IF I'M REAL STILL
AND LISTENING CAREFULLY I CAN HEAR HIS VOICE. YOU'D THINK
WITH ALL THAT STRENGTH, HE'D BE A BASS. BUT, NO. MY MAN IS A
TENOR.